# STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF BROWNING'S MONOLOGUES
## EMPHASIS ON SELECTED POEMS

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An Abstract

Presented to

the Faculty of the School of Humanities

Morehead State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Kathleen Cool

May, 1972

# STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF BROWNING'S MONOLOGUES

## EMPHASIS ON SELECTED POEMS

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Morehead State University, 1971

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The writer of this thesis will attempt to enhance the appreciation of the poetry of Robert Browning, especially of the monologues, through an analyzation and evaluation of certain external stylistic tendencies of the poet in five poems. To accomplish this task, this research must acknowledge certain basic weaknesses in the writings of this man, unique to him, and, at the same time, demonstrate that these weaknesses are surpassed by strengths and beauties of expression which outweigh any faults or peculiarities.

For purposes of research, primary sources included such collected works as those by Robert Bernard Martin, Charles J. Hazard, V. E. Stack, Horace E. Scudder, and some works collected by the Brownings' only son.

Considerable research has been conducted by many nineteenth and twentieth century writers involving Browning's writings. These include Park Honan, Philip Drew, Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, Roma A. King, William O. Raymond, Frances Theresa Russell, Thomas Blackburn, Leonard Burrows, and countless others. Much of this research has involved the poetry generally, evaluating Browning

as a poet, and sometimes as a philosopher. But this re-evaluation will consider the poet as a monologuist, as a contributor of a special kind of literary tradition. As evidenced by this study, though there exists extensive work on the various writings and idiosyncracies of Browning, no work handles the five monologues of this study in the very same way. Chapter One presents the statement of purpose, a background of the work already done in this area, and a general introduction to the poet and his stylistic technique. In the chapters that follow, there is an analysis of particular stylistic effects as they appear in these five monologues: "Andrea del Sarto," "My Last Duchess," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," "Prospice," and "A Grammarian's Funeral." Chapter Two, "Sound and Rhymes," considers such elements as end rhyme, alliteration, and rhyme scheme and their contributions to the meaning of the poems. Chapter Three, "Syntax and Diction," deals with syntax and diction, demonstrating the value of these two elements, especially in character portrayal of the monologuists. Chapter Four, "Figurative Language," relates the metaphorical affluence of Browning, giving examples of various kinds of figurative language. Chapter Five, "Rhythm and Meter," discusses the meter of the monologues, illustrating that Browning used both regular and very irregular rhythm in the monologues. The final chapter presents the findings of this thesis.

The results of this study have brought new light to some of the stylistic techniques that Browning used in creating the monologues. He composed with an originality and uniqueness which secure for him a position in the world of literature.

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Rose Orlich
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# CHAPTER I

## PURPOSE OF THE THESIS, BACKGROUND, AND GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO BROWNING

The purpose of this thesis is to enhance the appreciation of Robert Browning's monologues through a study of the technique of five of them. Such elements as syntax and diction, rhythm and meter, figurative language, and sound effects will be considered. In the following chapters, there is an analysis of particular stylistic effects as they appear in five monologues: "Andrea del Sarto," "My Last Duchess," "Prospice," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," and "A Grammarian's Funeral." Chapter Two, "Sound and Rhyme," considers such elements as end rhyme, alliteration, and rhyme scheme and their contribution to the meaning of the poem. Chapter Three, "Syntax and Diction," deals with syntax and diction, demonstrating their value, especially in character portrayal of the monologuists. Chapter Four, "Figurative Language," relates the metaphorical affluence of Browning, giving examples of various kinds of figurative language. Chapter Five, "Rhythm and Meter," discusses the meter of the monologues, illustrating that Browning used both regular and very irregular rhythm in the monologues. Chapter Six presents the findings of this thesis.

Literary critics, from the time of those who were Browning's contemporaries--including the Browning societies--to those in the

mid-twentieth century, have labored extensively to decipher the messages of this literary giant. Edward Berdoe's Browning Studies attempted to explain Browning to his contemporaries. Margret Holmes Bates' Browning Critiques, Gertrude Reese Hudson's Browning to His American Friends, and Maisie Ward's Robert Browning and His World: The Private Face all served as interpretations and evaluations of the man Browning and his writings. Thomas R. Lounsbury, William Clyde DeVane, Thomas Blackburn, Leonard Burrows, Philip Drew, and many others have published critical evaluations of Browning's poetry. Dallas Kenmare has been a constant defender of the poet. S. S. Curry, Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, Roma A. King, and Park Honan have done extensive study on the monologues, with emphasis on some of the more well-known ones. Hatcher's book, The Versification of Robert Browning, concerned itself mostly with rhythm. Park Honan's Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique analyzed twenty monologues, including several from The Ring and the Book. Other works do not include in their analyses this same combination of poems and stylistic devices in discussing the technique of Browning. Consequently, the present study introduces a new light in the analysis of Robert Browning's technique in the monologues.

In twentieth-century criticism, Browning maintains his position as one of England's major Victorian poets. For the reader "he embodies some of the most curious and pervasive tendencies of nineteenth-century literature."[1] And he is one of the

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[1]W. J. Dawson, Literary Leaders of Modern England (New York: The Chataqua Press, n. d.), p. 15.

greatest of poets, having so profoundly affected the thought of his time.[2] Through his writing, he projects a great mind. "A full mind! Browning certainly had that, the fullest mind probably of any literary man in his generation."[3] His mind was full of joie de vivre, which enabled him to be a teacher of life, reflecting his own personality and philosophy of life.

Browning, possessing a unique originality, composed numerous works. In "lengthiness, not to say long-windedness, he stands among modern poets almost alone."[4] He wrote, as though urged onward by a burning inward desire. "Because there was so much of him--such strength, such exuberance, such a teeming brain, such internal movement--he could not write with deliberation. He tumbled out pell-mell what was in him."[5] Because of his exuberance, he composed with extreme haste, revising probably as little as any poet that ever lived. What revision he did was in the interest of clearness of thought rather than beauty of expression. But occasionally his expression worried him. Accused on one occasion of being verbose, he determined within himself never to use two words where one would suffice, regardless of style or versification,[6] although he sometimes violated this principle.

Browning "composed with such ease and agility that he was not fastidious in selecting his phrases, and he never took what

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[2]Ibid., p. 151.

[3]Thomas Rain, Browning for Beginners (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim., 1904), p. 207.

[4]Ibid., p. 218.

[5]Ibid., p. 212.

[6]Dawson, op. cit., p. 148.

a poet like Tennyson would call scrupulous pains with his versification.[7] For Browning versification was strictly external and relevant, and such trivia should not be allowed to hamper expression of thought. But the poet did not completely ignore versification. Often his seemingly rough and unmetered style is the result of hazardous experiment, rather than carelessness and inattention. Browning experimented to communicate the message, and into his poetry he has "put the subtlest and deepest thought, and he uniformly puts a higher value on the thought than the method or manner of expression."[8] Consequently, the poet's blank verse at its best is more vital in quality than that of any other modern poet. Both rhymed and blank verse for technical quality can hardly be surpassed in the language.[9]

Sometimes Browning, as well as Tennyson, responded to the demands of a reading public slightly more than to his daemon, allowing himself to produce less than his best. Occasionally, Browning himself gave the public not what he felt about the human predicament, but what he knew the public expected him to feel. For this reason, an exceptionally thick rind of dull, sentimental, and didactic verse surrounds the great poetry, which assures this man a position among major poets.[10]

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[7]Harlan Henthorne Hatcher, The Versification of Robert Browning (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1928), p. 25.

[8]Dawson, op. cit., p. 147.

[9]Arthur Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), p. 13.

[10]Blackburn, Thomas, Robert Browning: A Study of His Poetry (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), p. 45.

The poet-philosopher's method of "treating a subject was to examine it through the eyes of some suitable character whom he selected or invented for the purpose."[11] Browning considered the monologue one end of a conversation, in which a definite speaker found himself in a definite, dramatic situation. Usually the reader meets a well-defined listener, although the character of the second person is portrayed solely from the impression he has created on the speaker. The conversation of the speaker to the character occurs in a definite situation as a part of human life.[12] Having composed his best form in dramatic poetry, Browning is generally conceded to have contributed more than any other poet to the development of the monologue.[13]

Many of the monologues have been subjected to extensive criticism. Often this criticism is helpful, but sometimes critics so completely dissect each particle of a work that they completely miss the message of the whole. Some critics have allowed such scrutinizing analysis to hinder their appreciation of Browning. But even an ordinary reader should try to understand Browning because of his extensive influence. Poets should not need to be interpreted, but "where there is something of infinite moment to be interpreted it is well to set aside fixed rules."[14] Creation

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[11]J. Charles Hazard, ed., Selections from Browning's Poems (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1929), p. xvii.

[12]S. S. Curry, Browning and the Dramatic Monologue (New York: Haskell House, 1965), p. 12.

[13]Roma A. King, Jr., The Bow and the Lyre (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 125.

[14]Dawson, op. cit., p. 151.

cannot be restricted by artificial and arbitrary rules; rules are for the observer who must be guided--not for the genius who must create. No one attacks Schnable, a contemporary pianist, because his rests and holds do not completely obey the sheet music before his eyes: to do so would be to quell the creative genius of the performer. Yet, a nominal knowledge of the rules of any game are beneficial, as long as they do not dominate the game.

A study of Browning indicates that his artistic deficiencies have probably cost him popularity with the general public. At the same time, however, literary critics and the reading public must recognize that "genius is so rare a gift that we must take it on its own terms, and we cannot afford to quarrel with the conditions it may impose on us...."[15]

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[15] Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

## SOUND AND RHYME

Not writing in Italian or French with a wealth of easily rhymed words, Robert Browning, like all other English writers, had to produce sound and rhyme in a rhyme-poor language. This lack of rhyme caused Browning to create atrocities of alliteration and rhyme. Some of these creations encourage the reader of his poetry to believe that the rhyme scheme, not the poet, determines what is said.

Quarrels over Browning's rhymes, as well as many Browning characteristics, belong, for the most part, to a bygone age. Oscar Wilde, in 1890, said of Browning's rhymes:

> Rhyme, that exquisite echo which in the Muse's hollow hill creates and answers its own voice; rhyme, which in the hands of the real artist becomes not merely a material element of natural beauty, but a spiritual element of thought and passion, also waking a new mood, it may be, or stirring a fresh train of ideas, or opening by mere sweetness and suggestion of sound some golden door at which the Imagination itself had knocked in vain; rhyme, which can turn man's utterance to the speech of gods; rhyme, the one chord we have added to the Greek lyre, became in Robert Browning's hands a grotesque misshapen thing, which at times made him masquerade in poetry as a low comedian, and ride Pegasus too often with his tongue in his cheek.[16]

But such a statement overlooks the new chord Browning strikes with as much genius and artistry as any other English poet.

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[16]Edgar Saltus, "The Critic as Artist," The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1923), p. 115.

Such a thought also neglects the perfect beauty and harmony of the rhymes of memorable poems like "Prospice," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and "Love Among the Ruins."[17] Examples of these perfect rhymes follow:

> The power of the night, the press of the storm,
> The post of the foe;
> Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
> Yet the strong man must go:
>
> Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in his hand
> Who saith, "A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be
> afraid!"
>
> Where the quiet-colored end of evening smiles
> Miles and miles
> On the solitary pastures where our sheep
> Half-asleep
> Tinkle homeward through the twilight, stray or stop
> As they crop---

Nor must the reader forget the "inconspicuous rhyme scheme"[18] of "My Last Duchess," contributing to the effect of one of Browning's greatest masterpieces. In "My Last Duchess," the duke's "inhuman drawl is made alive through the feminine and often sibilant rhymes--'munificence--pretense,' 'commands--stands,' 'thought a rarity--cast in bronze for me.'"[19]

As a boy, Browning had appreciated strange pets, bizarre stories, forced rhymes. "By the time he was twelve years old he had written a little volume of verse, which he desired to

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[17]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 107.

[18]James L. Potter, Elements of Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1967), p. 80.

[19]Blackburn, op. cit., p. 174.

publish under the title of Incondita. Thus early appears the taste for fantastic titles."[20] Even in his choice of titles, he chose grotesque words and creations. Elizabeth Barrett, in the days of their courtship, had recognized the roughness of his expression, to which she sometimes objected. She complained of a "...tendency--almost a habit, she observed--to make his lines difficult to read. 'Not that music is required everywhere,' she wrote, 'but that the uncertainty of rhythm throws the reader's mind off the rail and interrupts his progress with you and your influence with him.'"[21]

Browning, no doubt, loved the quaint, the odd, the jocose, the bizarre. But he used the oddities of rhyme to express himself, taking full advantage of poetic license. One who reads Browning "must therefore be prepared for full, or excessive, advantage to be taken of all the liberties allowed to the poet."[22] In "A Grammarian's Funeral" appear such atrocities of rhyme, showing full use of poetic liberty:

Cared-for till cock-crow:

Rimming the rock-row:

Fancy the fabric

Ere mortar dab brick!

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[20]George Herbert Palmer, "The Monologue of Browning," Harvard Theological Review, Vol. XI, No. 2, April, 1918, p. 121.

[21]Thomas R. Lounsbury, The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 181.

[22]Philip Drew, Ed., The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1970), p. 80.

Oh, if we draw a circle premature,

Greedy for quick returns of profit, sure

He settled Hoti's business--let it be!---

Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic De,

Property based Oun---

Dead from the waist down.

Hail to your purlieus,

Swallows and curlews!

Lightnings are loosened,

Peace let the dew send!

These examples demonstrate that the poet had "at times an extraordinary insensitivity to rhyme values; a kind of rhyming phobia which found a perverse pleasure in making unholy marriages between quite unrelated pieces of language."[23]

> Yet the turns and twists of his verse, his metrical liberties, his unexpected and at times somersaulting rhymes, are usually the bubbling of irrepressible high spirits, chafing at the yoke of aught that is tame or conventional. It should be noted that he only gives rein to an "outrageous gallop of rhymes" in poems having a certain raciness or bohemianism of content... When set in their proper perspective and viewed in relation to the whole body of his poetry, these outward flourishes of style, even when pushed to the verge of idiosyncrasy, are not to be condemned sweepingly as barbaric willfulness. They are often the frothings of a superabundant vitality, a tang of life.[24]

In poems like "Prospice" and "My Last Duchess," Browning's rhymes are flawless. In each four lines of "Prospice," the

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[23]Blackburn, op. cit., p. 42.

[24]William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 16.

first and third lines rhyme and the second and fourth. These rhymes are such rhymes as "face--place," "storm--form" "end--blend," and "breast--rest." Each of these, though a perfect rhyme, flows smoothly and fits inconspicuously into the pattern of thought. In "My Last Duchess," the poet uses rhyming couplets, and these "full rhyming couplets are unnoticeable, so perfectly do they express the exact tone of voice and human flavour of the protagonist, the hysteria which lies under the Duke's frigid formality."[25]

Except for those monologues in which Browning uses a rhyme scheme to convey best his meaning, he portrays the situation in blank verse. None of the monologuists is aware that he is speaking in blank verse all of the time, of course. Browning avoids rhyme "simply because it is in his view an unmistakable feature of poetry--no speaker, in other words, could be allowed to use rhyme (and indeed is allowed to use rhyme) without showing himself to be perfectly aware of the fact that he is rhyming."[26] Rhyme is really insignificant in Browning's blank verse. Instead of rhyme, Browning uses other devices to meet the demands of a single character speaking in an uninterrupted monologue: "... interjections, replies, and rejoinders which all but introduce dialogue; artful phrases, explosives, parenthetical asides, ellipses, short broken sentences which reveal character and

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[25]Blackburn op. cit., p. 45.

[26]Park Honan, Browning's Characters (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 263.

situation."[27] All of these grammatical devices give to the blank verse monologues their Browningesque color:

> Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
> Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
> Nephews---sons mine...ah God, I know not!
> Well---
> She, men would have to be your mother once,
> Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!"
> ("The Bishop Orders His Tomb")

> ...you must serve
> For each of the five pictures we require:
> It saves a model. So! keep looking so---
> My serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds!
> ---How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
> Even to put the pearl there! Oh so sweet---
> My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,
> Which everybody looks on and calls his,
> And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
> While she looks---no one's: very dear, no less.
> ("Andrea del Sarto")

Browning's alliteration has received some negative criticism, but critics have admitted that his alliterative creations often enforced the meaning in one way or another.[28] For example the "mine to man's bared breast she curls inside" of "Andrea del Sarto" commands "special attention because of the alliteration," thus emphasizing the image of the line.[29] In the "Bishop Orders His Tomb," the alliteration becomes quite significant. The reverie is linked by the alliterated words:

> What is done is done, and she is dead beside,
> Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
> And as she died so must we die ourselves,
> And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.

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[27]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 39.

[28]Honan, op. cit., p. 255.

[29]King, op. cit., p. 18.

> Life, how and what is it? As here I lie
> In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
> Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
> "Do I live, am I dead? Peace, peace seems all.
> Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;
> And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
> With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
> ---Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
> Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South
> He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!
>
> The passage begins with an alliterated movement of (d)-words, "done," "dead," "died," "die," "dying," "dream," "degrees," and "do," which by line 13 has been supplemented by an (l)-word one: "Life," "lie," "long," "live." Lines 13 and 14 are linked by "Praxed's" and the thrice-occurring "peace"; and movements of (t)- and (n)- words combine in the next two lines. Words beginning with sibilants and the phonetic (k) link lines 17-19; "cozened," "care," "Shrewd," "snatch," "corner," "South," "carrion," "curse," and "same." The progression---from (d) and (l), to (p), to (t) and (n), and then to (k) and the sibilants---in part replaces the structural element of thought that is missing. In this way alliteration helps to expose the Bishop's mind, for the sound of his words to some extent guides what he says, reflecting the subordination of intellect to feeling in his character. Sound in the monologue---sound, a sensuous element in itself---becomes a mark of the Bishop's extreme sensuousness, helping even, in the context later on, to deliver us an impression of the Bishop's sensuality.[30]

The alliteration of the poem really contributes to Browning's purpose, because repetition of words, consonants, and vowels appeals more to the ear than to the mind. There is more alliteration than usual, sometimes several letters carrying through a number of lines to form intense emotional and sensuous groups.[31] Such expressions as these are quite sensuous: "tooth and nail...," "the rare, the ripe," "rosy and flawless," "see and burst." Besides vowels and consonants repeated

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[30]Honan, op. cit., pp. 255-256.

[31]King, op. cit., p. 58.

within the line, "Browning repeats them also at the end so that they function as rhyme might,...missed--dig, beneath--me south--same, line--lurk, peach--prize, well--once--was. The effect, though more subtle than rhyme, is perceptible."[32]

Even though the alliteration in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" aids in producing the sensuous effect to characterize the Bishop, Browning does not use alliteration for sensuousness in "Andrea del Sarto." Often the alliteration emphasizes by calling attention to important thoughts, as in these lines:

> Love, we are in God's hand.
> How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
> So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
> I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!

Sometimes alliteration becomes a part of rhythm. "Stressing lightly conceptually unimportant syllables, and calling attention to others by heavy stress and alliteration, Browning achieves simultaneously in some lines both the artistic effect of alliterative verse and an emphasis on idea.[33] For example, notice the alliteration in the following:

> Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,
> And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
> Some lump, ah God, of Lapis lazuli,
> Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
> Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast....

On occasions, Browning's rhymed verse makes good use of alliteration. In "My Last Duchess,"

> The dropping of the daylight in the West,
> the bough of cherries some officious fool
> Broke in the orchard for her...

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., p. 19.

contribute to the effectiveness of the poem. In "Prospice,"

> Fear death?---to feel the fog in my throat,
>
> The power of the night, the press of the storm,
> The post of the foe;
>
> ...a peace out of pain...

enhance the beauty of dignity and perfection of the poem, even though the alliteration, like the rhyme, is quite inconspicuous. In "A Grammarian's Funeral," the rhythmical and alliterative vigor of "'Ground he at grammar' draws attention to apparent incongruities in the grammarian's labours."[34]

Browning's end-rhyme scheme is quite as varied as the other incongruities of rhyme and sound. The blank verse monologues, of course, have no particular rhyme scheme, having no end rhyme. In "Prospice," the rhyme scheme is abab, cdcd, efef, etc. to the poem's finish. "My Last Duchess," as has already been mentioned, is written in rhyming couplets, aa, bb, cc, dd, etc., the pattern of which unobviously emerges as an asset to the poem. The rhyme scheme of "A Grammarian's Funeral" is basically the same as "Prospice,"; meeting the demands of this rhyme pattern becomes awkward in this poem, and these rhymes afford critics the opportunity to slash Browning's rhyme.

Browning in his construction of sound and rhyme is often grotesque. Critics differ in their acceptance of this Browningian trait. "Persons of standing declare the man (Browning) a barbarian, who broke into the fair fields of verse with poetry cacophonous in

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[34]Leonard Burrows, Browning the Poet (Nedlands, West Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1969), p. 128.

sound, obscure in expression, and shocking in subject. On the other hand, there are those who regard Browning as half divine."[35] And yet, most of the readers "in the age of Auden, Pound, and Thomas are not so much deterred by the obscurity that weighed heavily against him in his own time and find his cacophony and burlesque humor in tune with their tastes. They are impressed... by his mastery of several styles, and his...deft use of words."[36] Regardless of others' acceptance or rejection of his works, Browning used freely, and often knowingly, a variety of sound effects. His "product might not suit its consumers, but the last thing the producer did was to neglect the form, and he knew it if they did not. In the lexicon of this meticulous gentleman and expert scholar there was no such word as neglect."[37] Browning was indeed a creater of grotesque rhymes!

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[35]Palmer, op. cit., p. 121.

[36]Clarence Tracy, Ed., Browning's Mind and Art (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 1.

[37]Frances Theresa Russell, One Word More on Browning (California: Stanford University Press, 1927), p. 86.

## CHAPTER III

## SYNTAX AND DICTION

Many poets have written peculiarly, but few will deny that Browning possesses a grammar all his own. Some negative critics such as Roma A. King, Jr., George Santayana, and Richard D. Altick sometimes grudgingly admit that Browning was a Victorian innovator and somewhat of a forerunner of later expression, but very few ever single out a great number of his works for praise. Browning does have a "grammar of his own, and it could be a delicate instrument...there is a sameness in Browning's grammar, and...the monologuists speak in a Browningesque idiom."[38] In Browning's poetry, often the "reader is unconscious of language in itself and thinks only of what the language is describing or of the person who is using it."[39] Especially in dramatic verse, the language is "not the primary object of attention, and the reader will be more aware of the explicit object of the language--that is, it will be concerned with dialogue or action."[40] For example, the Duke of "My Last Duchess" does not "come alive by direct description. We are not told that 'there was a wart on the left nostril from which sprouted a long thick hair; and a certain

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[38]Honan, op. cit., p. 272.

[39]Ioan M. Williams, Browning: Literature in Perspective (London: Evans Brothers, Ltd., 1967), p. 155.

[40]Ibid., p. 85.

slackness of the thin cruel mouth.' The essence of the Duke's personality is in the texture of the language."[41] Browning wrote to describe the character in the dramatic situation, publishing often after the first draft. Leaving punctuation and revision to a French friend, Browning had the conscience "of a pavement-artist...and a natural impediment of thought which made it hard for him to construct even an intelligible telegram."[42] He is indeed one of "those writers who treat language not as a musical instrument, needing delicacy no less than power in its handling, but rather as an iron bar which they are to twist and tangle in an exhibition of their prowess as professional strong men."[43]

Browning could and did write well. At a random reading of Browning, one would necessarily in half an hour come upon scores of thoughts nobly and admirably expressed in clear-ringing English, with "delicate attention to phrase and perfect adherence to the laws of construction...in the same half-hour...passages where the nominative has lost its verb beyond hope of recovery, and phrases seem to have been jerked out haphazard, in a sort of volcanic eruption of thought..."[44] But in the case of Browning, the success is quite obvious to most people:

> Apart from a certain superficial grotesqueness to which we are soon accustomed, he easily arouses and engages the reader by the pithiness of his phrase, the

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[41]Blackburn, op. cit., p. 173.

[42]F. L. Lucas, Ten Victorian Poets (Cambridge: University Press, 1948), p. 33.

[43]Ibid., p. 34.

[44]Dawson, op. cit., p. 147.

> volume of his passion, the vigour of his moral judgment, the liveliness of his historical fancy. It is obvious that we are in the presence of a great writer, of a great imaginative force, of a master in the expression of emotion. What is perhaps not so obvious, but no less true, is that we are in the presence of a barbaric genius, of a truncated imagination, of a thought and an art inchoate and ill-digested, of a volcanic eruption that tosses itself quite blindly and ineffectually into the sky.[45]

Even though grotesque, Browning's verse is not "complex or artificial; it is natural and in the legitimate tradition of nature. The verse sprawls like the trees, dances like the dust; it is ragged like the thunder-cloud, it is top-heavy like the toadstool."[46]

Browning himself realizes that he was not always understandable to his public. The poet was supposed to have said after reading a certain passage which he himself could not understand: "Now only God knows!"[47] Both Browning and his contemporaries bear witness to his inadequacies in expressing himself. Browning societies were founded to cipher esoteric passages. But Browning felt that God wanted him to be a poet, told him to speak. "Like a bowl full of pebbles, the mind is full of thoughts. Song wields thoughts; the mind just holds them. And if you can tip all the thoughts out of mind, you can sense God's will while it is not being expressed."[48]

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[45]George Santayana, Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 189.

[46]G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1903), p. 149.

[47]Stewart W. Holmes, "Browning: Semantic Stutterer," PMLA, LX, March, 1945, pp. 231-255.

[48]Ibid., p. 241.

Browning's letters to Elizabeth Barrett are evidence that he often felt himself incapable of adequate expression. He found difficulty in expressing himself and sometimes of understanding what other men wrote. In a letter to Elizabeth on March 12, 1845, he tells her:

> I don't care about reading now---the world, and the pictures of it, rather than writings about the world! But you must read books in order to get words and forms, for the "public" if you write, and that you needs must do if you fear God. I have no pleasure in writing, myself---none, in the mere act---though all pleasure in the sense of fulfilling a duty, whence, if I have done my real best, judge how heart-breaking a matter must it be to be pronounced a poor creature by critic this and acquaintance the other.[49]

And again on May 24, 1845, he continues along the same thoughts:

> Still I am utterly unused, of these late years particularly, to dream of communicating anything about that (this hidden self) to another person (all my writings are purely dramatic, as I am always anxious to say) that when I make never so little attempt, no wonder I bungle notably. "Language," too, is an organ that never studded this heavy head of mine. Will you not think me very brutal if I tell you I could almost smile at your misapprehension of what I meant to write?[50]

On one occasion he wrote to Julia Wedgwood and asked this question: "My friend, am I intelligible?"[51] Yet Browning refused at times to admit that some of his phraseology was obscure. His noble refusal to stoop to unmask the alleged obscurity gives

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[49]Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, 1845-1846, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1898), p. 41.

[50]Ibid., p. 76.

[51]Richard Curle, Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1937), p. 79.

"evidence of Browning's rationalizing his guilty convictions of his linguistic confusion into a lordly disdain for those who hinted at it."[52]

Browning's poetry was criticized by his contemporaries because of its "lack of 'poetic' qualities of smoothness and prettiness. He makes it hard, uses frequent inversions and elisions, coins new words and uses others which many of his readers would have considered to be too colloquial or striking for use in poetry."[53] His poetry was different from his contemporaries, but perhaps no difference is so "immediately noticeable and so perennially surprising as this determination to use as the staple of his poetry the common language of Victorian England, plain Queen's English."[54] The range of the poetry is enormous. One of the severest difficulties confronting a reader of Browning is its sheer size. "It is so varied and so enormous that Browning demands always the full extent of his reader's knowledge of the language, and keeps his faculties always at full stretch."[55] He uses conversational language considerably and makes full use of poetic licenses everywhere, employing full use of the language in colloquialism and non-literary idioms. "Browning's use of a vocabulary and syntax which might equally well be encountered in a novel or a newspaper does much to diminish

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[52]Holmes, op. cit., p. 234.

[53]Williams, op. cit., p. 153.

[54]Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 281.

[55]Ibid., p. 76.

the sharp distinction between poetry and the rest of literature which was such a prominent feature of nineteenth-century letters."[56] In his own lifetime, even in "his heydey, the man 'jawed' at times; he was not to be depended upon for certainty of taste or touch; he would drop hideous negligences or more hideous outrages of intention in the middle of a masterpiece..."[57]

The monologues are written loosely. The plan of the poems is "rarely straightforward: there are digressions, parentheses, trains of thought broken and resumed later, sometimes a seemingly random succession of arguments and illustrations..."[58] But the reader must remember that the monologuists are unusual people in unusual situations and that "if these strange beings are to be transferred imaginatively to printed pages, they will use their own language, such as is current among ladies and gentlemen. Not being ladies and gentlemen, they should use the language which accords with their special character."[59] One need not be shocked at a language not ever heard of before in poetry; one must be prepared to follow tortuously a repetition of observations and reflections, which are not a logically connected series.

Certain syntactical features of Browning's monologues which seem to be especially Browningesque are the occasional omission

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[56]Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 281.

[57]Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker, The Browning Critics (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 29.

[58]Drew, The Poetry of Browning, p. 118.

[59]Palmer, op. cit., p. 134.

of parts of speech, elisions, and certain idiosyncrasies of punctuation.[60] For example, certain lines in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" are awkward:

> Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,

or

> There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world---

or

> What do they whisper thee,

or

> Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South...

Syntax very often reflects the mental processes or the mental condition of the speaker, and in this way helps to reveal his nature. In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," the sentences vary considerably in length and structure, indicating a shift from an apparently stable mind to one which is not so sure of itself:

> Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
> Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?

And then to show his hesitation:

> Nephews---sons mine...ah God, I know not!
> Well---

Many of the sentences are unfinished, left hanging in the air--- the speech of a dying man:

> For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
> To death--ye wish it--God, ye wish it!
> Stone---
> Gritstone, a-crumble!

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[60] Honan, op. cit., p. 272.

Especially near the end of the poem as delirium comes upon the Bishop, he speaks in fragments:

> As if the corpse they keep were oozing through---
>
> Fewer tapers there,
>
> But in a row:
>
> That I may watch at leisure if he leers---
> Old Gandolf---at me, from his onion-stone,
> As still he envied me, so fair she was!

In the poem, the syntactical construction of the Bishop's thoughts "attest to the prevailing sensuousness of his character---sensuousness that leads and dominates the thought:"[61]

> ...Well---
> She, men would have to be your mother once,
> Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!
>
> ---Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
> Put me where I may look at him! True peach,
> Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!
>
> One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,
> There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world---...

The sensuousness of the Bishop is also reflected in his diction. Most of the nouns are concrete, but the few abstract ones are those which are habitually converted into materialistic values: "God," "death," "life," "peace," and "world." In five of the seven times "God" is used, the Bishop speaks of God in the form of an exclamation: "ah, God!" "God curse the same!" "God, ye wish it!" He thinks of the Deity as an anthropomorphic being: he refers to God as a marble statue, and he emphasizes the purely physical aspect of the mass. The Bishop uses these abstract words, then, as part of the traditional vocabulary of a dedicated Bishop,

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[61]Honan, op. cit., p. 282.

but constantly transmutes them from spiritual to material signs.[62] He makes even the normally abstract words concrete: "church" as a specific building and "pulpit" as a platform in that building. In some situations, the action becomes more prominent by the syntactical pattern. In the following line, the arm-folding is "pointed up by the line's repetition of syntactical pattern and the balancing of stresses, two and two:"[63]

x / x / x x x / x /
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook...
Subj. verb obj. subj. verb obj.

In "My Last Duchess," the syntax becomes very important, concerning the commands of the Duke to stop the smiles: "it is a chilling meiosis: 'the words impart much more than they express!'"[64] The reader never knows unquestionably how the smiles are stopped; but they are stopped with such completeness and finality that the reader is left to his own horrified conjecturing:

I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

Syntax significantly portrays the Duke's character:

> The paratactic syntax sounds impressively oracular...the very grammar invites a Biblical parody. The Duke has dazzled his auditor with a magnificent opening, and fully conscious of the effect he has made, he can now afford to descend from this plateau of ceremony, with its operatic pointing at the picture, to a drawing-room atmosphere of mere formality.

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[62] King, op. cit., p. 60.

[63] Burrows, op. cit., p. 112.

[64] Ibid., p. 118.

> In extending his civilities to the envoy, this autocratic spellbinder, while choosing "Never to stoop" himself, becomes a subtle social parody of the Christian God of Browning's St. John, who "stoops...to rise... Such ever was love's way..." (A Death in the Desert, I, 134). The Duke pretends to "stoop," not out of love (for his melodramatic pretensions exclude the imagination of love), but only out of a selfish desire to dramatize his own importance.[65]

The thoughts of the Duke are the key to his jealous pride and envious and haughty nature! The break in thought in both of these heightens their effectiveness:

> She thanked men,---good! but thanked
> Somehow---I know not how---as if she ranked
> My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
> With anybody's gift.
>
> Even had you skill
> in speech---(which I have not)---to make your will
> Quite clear to such an one...

Browning makes use of his conversation at writing in this line:

> Will't please you rise?

and in his last speech where the subject-verb-complement order of his thoughts and the command further betray his character:

> Nay, we'll go
> Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
> Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
> Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

In "Prospice," Browning propounded a great thought: "So that in the case of 'Prospice' the great thing Browning wanted to say was that death was not the end, but beyond the last fight of dying lay the happiness of reunion with his wife...."[66] The

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[65]David W. Shaw, The Dialectal Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 77.

[66]A. Allen Brockington, Browning and the Twentieth Century (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 31.

syntactical construction of the poem adds to its dignity. Most of the language and sentence structure contribute to a formality, except the contraction of "Though a battle's to fight...."

Browning philosophized in "A Grammarian's Funeral" that the "great thing in life was that the work, incomplete on earth, was only a stage in the heavenly period."[67] In relating the account of these devoted servants as they carried their master up to his burial ground, Browning used considerably informal and colloquial usage and Victorian words. Some of these words were not even current in his day:

> He settled Hoti's business---let it be!---
> properly based Oun---
> Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic De...

Often the syntactical construction aided in showing that the grammarian had not really lived, but had merely lived through other's experiences:

> "What's in the scroll," quoth he, "thou keepest furled?
> Show me their shaping,
> Theirs who most studied man, the bard and sage,---
> Give!"---So, he gowned him,
> Straight got by heart that book to its last page:
> Learned, we found him.

In "Andrea del Sarto," Browning employs a pause indicated by punctuation to express Andrea's tired resignation of the undesirable chores ahead of him:

> Oh, I'll content him,---but to-morrow, Love!

Just a few lines farther in the poem, a syntactical break lends a hint to the character of Andrea:

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[67] Ibid.

> This evening more than usual, and it seems
> As if---forgive---now should you let me sit
> Here by the window with your hand in mine...

There are many variations in the sentence structure. All of these---"the complex sentences, the numerous subordinations, the interpolations, the exclamations, the lack of syntactical connections give the effect of thought in conflict, of intellectual uncertainty and emotional instability."[68] The sentences reflect the flow of a tortured progression of thought that cannot stop or proceed logically. A series of conditionals (the subjunctive is the grammatical mood of regret) show that Andrea has failed and that he recognizes failure.[69] Even though he is only a half-man, Andrea considers what he might have done:

> I know both what I want and what might gain,
> And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
> "Had I been two, another and myself,
> Our head would have o'erlooked the world!"
> . No doubt.
>
> Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:
> But all the play, the insight and the stretch---
> Out of me, out of me!
>
> I might have done it for you. So it seems:
> Perhaps not. All is as God overrules.
>
> In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
> And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
> Yet the will's somewhat---somewhat, too, the power---
> And thus we half-men struggle.
>
> How I could paint, were I but back in France,
> One picture, just one more---the Virgin's face...

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[68]King, op. cit., p. 24.

[69]Tracy, op. cit., p. 27.

Andrea wishes he could be like Rafael or Agnolo, but informs the reader through the syntax that not outwardly, but inwardly, he realizes he could never be as great a painter as they.

The small number of verbs in the sentences slows down the action and heightens the sense of weariness. Several lines contain a minimum number of action verbs:

> I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
> Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,
> In that humane great monarch's golden look,---
> One finger in his beard or twisted curl
> Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,
> One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
> The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
> I painting proudly with his breath on me,
> Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of soul
> Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,---
> And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,
> This in the background, waiting on my work,
> To crown the issue with a last reward!

In these fourteen lines appear only three finite verbs. In some the verb is implied; in others participles function suggestively as verbs. But by constructing the sentences in this way, Browning avoids disturbing the quiet, autumnal atmosphere with active verbs. In some of these thoughts there are not even participles:[70]

> But all the play, the insight and the stretch---
> Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?
>
> Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

The three monosyllables at the end of the poem are quite appropriately placed here and to them the whole poem has pointed:

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[70]King, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

> ...the verb, the possessive pronoun, and the noun; each has its bitter burden. His only comfort---and a cold one she is---the woman for whom he sacrificed his integrity as man and artist,---in contemplating whom he saw mirrored at twilight the full failure of his life and character---no longer affords him even her physical presence. She leaves to keep a rendezvous with livelier company, and he resignedly watches her go ("My Love"!) He is left alone with himself and lacking the saving grace of rationalizations that will stick, he carries the kingdom of hell within him.[71]

Browning composed in a way quite foreign to most writers. He wrote excessively; sometimes his command of language was beyond reproach--sometimes his readers needed the aid of a Browning dictionary. Nevertheless his language spoke for him.

> But these great merits were accompanied by uncommon and sometimes very ugly defects. It was obvious that his occasional cacophonies and vulgarities were not merely an exaggeration of his recognition of the truth that the vernacular can be made to impart vigour, and that discords and degradations of scale and tone heighten and brighten musical effects. They were at any rate sometimes clearly the result of a combination of indolence and bad taste,---indolence that would not take the trouble to remove, bad taste that did not fully perceive, the gravity of the blemishes that wanted removing in his very finest passages. There was also that most fatal defect which the ill-natured fairy so often annexes to the gifts of vigorous and fertile command of language,---an excessive voluminousness and volubility.[72]

Yet critics accept his greatness, despite his syntactical difficulties:

> Yet, he was great: and though he turned language into ignoble clay, he made from it men and women that live. He is the most Shakespearian creature since Shakespeare. If Shakespeare could sing with myriad lips, Browning could stammer through a thousand mouths...He will be remembered as a

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[71] Ibid., p. 30.

[72] Litzinger and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 33.

> writer of fiction, as the most supreme writer of fiction, it may be, that we have ever had. The only man who can touch the hem of his garment is George Meredith. Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose.[73]
>
> It was obvious on the credit side that here was a man with an almost entirely novel conception of poetical vocabulary and style, with a true and wonderful lyrical gift....[74]

Browning--thought by some grotesque, bizarre, awkward, and rambling--fulfilled his God-given task of being a poet.

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[73]Saltus, op. cit., p. 115.

[74]Litzinger and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 32.

## CHAPTER IV

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The imaginative habit is an essential ingredient in the artistic temperament of real poetic achievement. Perhaps a poet is born, not made. The imaginative habit is a native endowment, not an acquired characteristic, regardless of careful cultivation. Robert Browning was innately endowed with a vivid imagination:

> This is the case with Browning. He speaks in figures, for the figures come. It is the way he thinks and feels. Hence his metaphors are not extraneous ornaments, overlaid and detachable. They are wool of his fabric, so interwoven with the literal warp that the two together form a texture neither sleazy nor coarse, having the firmness of linen and the sheen of silk. The different strands may be discerned, but to separate would be to destroy.[75]

To write with a poetic image "was for him the oblique way of telling the truth, of doing the thing that shall breed the thought."[76] Once in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, he reveals his consciousness of the limitations of his poetry through... an image:

> ...these scenes and songscraps are such mere and very escapes of my inner power, which live in me like the light in those crazy Mediterranean phares I have watched at sea, wherein the light is ever

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[75]Russell, op. cit., p. 92.

[76]Willard Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery: The Study of a Deatil in Poetic Design (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 3.

> revolving in a dark gallery, bright and alive, and only after a weary interval leaps out, for a moment, from the one narrow chink, and then goes on with the blind wall between it and you...[77]

Browning frequently used the metaphor of "white light" as "representative of Shelley's life and poetry...and as a symbol of spiritual verities which are absolute and ideal---the nature of God, Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Heaven, the Soul."[78]

A poet's figurative speech is one of the most important aspects of his poetry because his figures paint the portrait he wants to draw. By his figures the poet reveals his "mental furniture, association of ideas, prejudices, and preoccupations.... His imagination, being forged from his experience and observation, cannot transcend them."[79] Browning's metaphoric wealth is "prodigious and prodigally expended, and like his prosody shows at once variety and restraint; the qualities of an affluent independent liberal who despises anarchy."[80] The situation is very often in a Browning monologue that the "speaker says more than he is aware of and the reader is left 'to say the rest for him.'"[81]

Browning used hundreds of different symbols for his figurative expression. Dumb creatures fill his pages as members of the human family: slugs, doves, crows, flies, ermine, tigers, bees, snakes,

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[77]Letters, op. cit., p. 22.

[78]Raymond, op. cit., p. 194.

[79]Russell, op. cit., p. 88.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Burrows, op. cit., p. 107.

etc. Work and play, the two poles of human activity, furnish much to create character and convey a message. Most of these figures appear in the form of games, of chance, sports, travel or adventure---inevitable on the part of a man whose destiny had never steered him into a life of drudgery or routineness! His aristocratic pages usually are profusely bejeweled with precious stones of many kinds: pearl, topaz, sapphire, and much gold. Candles, lamps, and oils furnish symbolic illumination. Human nature probably furnishes the largest quota for Browning's figurative speech; gastronomic and culinary figures adorn his work. The feast of reason and flow of soul to which he invites us often takes the form of banquet table and flowing bowl.[82] Browning used colour, sometimes closely associated with animals, to create an ironic or other effect.[83] In addition to his love for animals, Browning loved flowers, which he sometimes used in his writings. His mother, Sara Ann Wiedmann Browning, instilled many of these domestic loves in him.[84] One of the poet's favorite images was the star, a constant favorite. This particular image was "pictorially and spiritually related to the general vision of light with which the poet was intensely preoccupied throughout the greater part of his poetic career,"[85] as an image of resolution, aspiration, and supreme attainment.

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[82]Russell, op. cit., pp. 90-92.

[83]Honan, op. cit., p. 189.

[84]Burrows, op. cit., p. 10.

[85]Smith, op. cit., p. 3.

Browning is also peculiarly a poet of touch. The world of imagination which he creates is "strikingly vivid and real; in it we have a sense of solidarity, an atmosphere that envelops an earth beneath the feet, hands that meet and clasp our own."[86] In fact, a metaphor in "Andrea Del Sarto" gives the poet's essential philosophy:

> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for?

Browning often uses "fingers" and "hands" in his writings when he "flings himself into the arena, and from the solid earth reaches forth phantom hands that touch all mundane things and grasp at stars."[87] There are three ways to grasp figurative expression: eye, ear, and touch. Browning allows the reader often to feel, as well as to see and hear, his comparison, being "obviously the poet par excellence of the third dimension---the architect, sculptor, poet to the fingertips."[88]

Browning uses considerable irony and satire in his work. He is "first of all a dramatic satirist, agile and picturesque in manner, although joining all satirists in attacking abuse... his dramatic attack is always made upon those who waste life."[89] One must realize his satirical comment in the saying of Pippa as she passes the shrub-house of Luca, where all is wrong with the

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[86]John Kester Bonnell, "Touch Images in the Poetry of Robert Browning," PMLA, Vol. XXXVII, 1922, pp. 574-598.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid., p. 584.

[89]Bennett Weaver, "A Primer Study in Browning's Satire," College English, XIV, No. 2, 1952, pp. 76-81.

world: "God's in his heaven---/All's right with the world." To hail these words as the epitome of Browning's philosophy would be dull and wrong.[90] Experience with the outer world makes people more aware of themselves; self-knowledge enables people to know others. Maybe the problems Browning felt and understood allowed him to create Andrea del Sarto and the Duke of "My Last Duchess." Certainly his zest for life and acute sensory awareness are responsible for the spawning vitality of his nature images, enabling him to use these as figurative examples of truths of life. He was also more aware of evil, of the shadow side of human nature than any other poet of his age.[91]

Browning through figurative language created very real people in the monologues. He begins the Duke's account of the last duchess by using a comparison in the first two lines:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
> Looking as if she were alive.

From the very beginning, the Duke gives a small hint as to his character and his concern for others. And in his next words, he makes the impact of the preceding comparison even stronger when he says:

> ...I call
> That piece a wonder, now. Fra Pandolf's hands
> Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

The proud, insolent Duke appreciates the wonder of a created work of art, expressing little or no concern for the object of the creation. "Looking as if she were alive" indicates his cruel

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[90] Ibid., p. 76.

[91] Blackburn, op. cit., p. 192.

heart for the duchess herself. In the line, "Fra Pandolf's hands /Worked busily a day...." he makes use of the touch image; instead of saying "Fra Pandolf worked busily a day," Browning heightens the impression on the reader. A bit of personification enhances the effect of "I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together." The reader immediately realizes that somehow the Duke has incapacitated the duchess. No one knows exactly how, but the personification adds to the horror of the situation. After reporting the cessation of the smiles, the Duke repeats the comparison that he made at the beginning of the poem: "There she stands/As if alive." The repeated expression merely intensifies the marble quality of the duke's heart.

The last three lines of the poem give an added and final touch to the character of the Duke:

> Notice Neptune, though,
> Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
> Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

In speaking so nonchalantly of the picture of Neptune in the same breath in which he speaks of his last duchess, the Duke further reveals his contempt for the alleged failure of this last duchess. "Neptune...taming a sea-horse" suggests the Duke's desired relationship with his duchess.[92] The Duke "seems himself as Neptune; the artist has cast him as a mythological god."[93]

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[92]Potter, op. cit., p. 68.

[93]George Monteiro, "Browning's 'My Last Duchess,'" Victorian Poetry, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1963, pp. 235-237.

From his own self-portrayal, the Duke emerges as a heartless, selfish, haughty, cold and cruel tyrant.

Browning wrote "Prospice," a word which means to look forward, shortly after the death of his beloved Elizabeth. This consolation for his grief seems to have no other application than just an outburst of his grief,[94] but Browning speaks eloquently in metaphors as he anticipates a reunion with his wife. He speaks of the fear in encountering such a journey.

> Fear death?---to feel the fog in my throat,
> The mist in my face,
> When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
> I am nearing the place...

The "fog," the "mist," and the "snow" signify the uncertainty of what occurs. He speaks of death as the "Arch Fear," saying that even the "strong man must go..." The poem closes with an apostrophe, in which Browning addresses his wife and looks forward with eagerness to the time when he shall again see her:

> Then a light, then thy breast
> O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
> And with God be the rest!

In "The Grammarian's Funeral" Browning writes of the funeral of a scholar. One would naturally expect that the "erudite Browning should choose a pedant as his symbol,"[95] one filled with learning, and yet so unlearned in living. The poem is filled with irony, but the principal irony not at the grammarian's expense. This irony "is inseparable from the manifestations of

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[94]Philip Drew, Ed., Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 236.

[95]Shaw, op. cit., p. 86.

the higher ethical and religious lives as they overlap with the lower aesthetic stage to which Browning's choice of the disciples's point of view necessarily confines us."[96]

The speaker in the monologue is the "leader of the band... addressing his fellow bearers in praise and appreciation of their master, interrupting himself occasionally to give them marching directions."[97] As they march up the mountain, the reader realizes that the funeral procession is a "symbolic procession...the march of the progress of a man as he attains to new intellectual heights, on the mountain-tops where the illuminating flashes occur:"[98]

> Bury this man there?
> Here---here's the place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
> Lightnings are loosened,
> Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
> Peace let the dew send!

The reason for burial on the mountain crest is that from the "burial-place of the grammarian light will radiate to other minds... his work of illumination is not finished; others will build upon the structure that he left, and the new structures will be brighter for his labors."[99] But even though the grammarian spent a life of significant toil, the knowledge which he sought was imperfect.

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Emma J. Burt, The Seen and the Unseen in Browning (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1923), p. 38.

[98] William Whitla, The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 69.

[99] Ibid., p. 73.

This knowledge did not allow him to live. The reader, acknowledging a disciple of the grammarian as the narrator of the poem, soon gets the impression that possibly the narrating disciple and the other disciples carrying the corpse up the mountain protest too much for the knowledge to have been perfect.

The grammarian is, without doubt, the hero of his disciples, and not the hero of the reader, certainly not to the same degree. Browning advised men to live life to the fullest, and certainly the grammarian does not live fully; his goal, "though superficially lofty, actually was low. And when he does go up the mountain, it is not under his own power, but as a corpse borne on the shoulders of his disciples."[100] The essence of the entire poem is contained in such words as "book," "know," and "learn," on the one hand, and "life" and "live" on the other. The grammarian grew "learned," but his "knowledge of life (symbolized as a 'book') was second- or third-hand, and it was completely uninspired, mechanical ('got by heart')."[101] When the grammarian says: "Hence with life's pale lure!" he speaks of "life" as a low ape-like existence, adding "That low man seeks a little thing to do." Near the end of the poem, "live" has the meaning of the life-loving critics, who have really discounted "life":

> ...The multitude below
> Live, for they can, there;
> This man decided not to Live but Know---

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[100]Drew, Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 201.

[101]Ibid., p. 203.

In contrasting "living" with "knowing," the disciple "is using 'living' only in the sense of the 'low man's' ape-like existing from one moment to the next as he receives his pleasures in installments, fragmented and discrete."[102] One wonders if there is irony in the last two lines:

> Leave him---still loftier than the world suspects,
> Living and dying.

As in "The Grammarian's Funeral," "Andrea del Sarto" is filled with figurative language. Even the subtitle, "The Faultless Painter," conveys immediately the opposite meaning of what the poem contains. Browning chooses to make of the "faultless painter" the faulty husband---contrasting perfection in art with moral failure, picturing the scene thus:

> Andrea is quiet and passive, content to live his rather unhappy life in the seclusion of Fiesole. Browning has chosen the evening hour of Andrea's life...when a "common grayness silvers everything," and with irony he concludes his thought, "All in a twilight, you and I alike." But Lucrezia is still able to have her lovers, and Andrea must wink at her behaviour. Lucrezia had caused him all of his trouble; for his mistake in marrying her, he must pay all his life.[103]

The reader recognizes at once that Andrea is a tragic figure. His tragedy is "to know at once what he aspires to and what, in contrast, he can achieve. Ironically he has insight and sensibility to feel the loss of that which he cannot grasp; his technical skill highlights rather than mitigates his spiritual

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[102]Shaw, op. cit., p. 84.

[103]Whitla, op. cit., p. 66.

poverty."[104] The reader's response to Andrea is immediately one of pity because of the situation in which the painter finds himself:

> ...pity, dictated not by the painter's ignorance but by his very lack of ignorance. He knows himself too well to find solace; no soothing balm of deception can alleviate his stark awareness of his nature and present situation...self-deception is a psychological device by which a human being is enabled to avert the whole intolerable truth about himself; it makes life, however less honest, a little more endurable. Andrea's tragedy is that he has no such refuge.[105]

Andrea desires for himself a happy and normal marital relationship. But the barrenness of such a relationship reveals itself in a pun:

> And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.

The word "bared" is a pun, which suggests qualities of masculine strength which Andrea desires, and yet at the same time points up the bareness of his soul.[106] In fact, Andrea seeks Lucrezia's breast, not she his. He becomes submissive. There is nothing in his soul for her. She called him with the command of a lover's whistle. She is the assertive one, he the receptive one. The real irony in the entire situation is that Andrea can create a faultless painting, but not even his pure craftsmanship can give to his wife the mind and soul which would create a truly great painting. Andrea has aspiration enough, but not the inspiration

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[104]Roma A. King, Jr., The Focusing Artifice: The Poetry of Robert Browning (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 103.

[105]Tracy, op. cit., p. 19.

[106]King, The Bow and The Lyre, p. 31.

which can only come from the enjoyment of harmony, the moment of vision, the moment of love.[107] Andrea's wife sees the irony of their marriage; she has her rendezvous! Andrea says to her at the beginning of the poem:

No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:

The "my" here is, of course, ironic, for she is not his, and he knows that she is not. Shortly he says:

I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,

and

Oh, I'll content him,---but to-morrow, Love!

One feels pity for him when he even uses the word "love"! He is constantly aware that she belongs more to the "Cousin" than to him.

The gold of Lucrezia's hair becomes important, as an object which Andrea possesses, but the situation again becomes ironic, because he does not even possess that. His life is declined to silver years, and his art is turned to silver-gray:

All is silver-gray
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!

Andrea's "eventual capitulation and destruction are suggested by a group of frequently repeated words associated with values: worth, pay, gold, silver, gain, reward."[108] The "golden" represents

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[107]Whitla, op. cit., p. 69.

[108]King, The Bow and the Lyre, p. 25.

his "kingly days" when he worked for the monarch, Francis. He enjoyed the king's "golden look" and

> One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
> The jingle of his gold chain in my ear.

But Andrea's work changed; his whole attitude changed. All his plans became commonplace. In these two following lines, the words "gain" and "profitless" suggest the hold which commercialism began to have on him:

> I know both what I want and what might gain,
> And yet how profitless to know.

Monetary terms became more valuable to him than fulfilling himself in life. The words "golden" and "gray" also contrast the difference in the life that Andrea now lives and the life he once lived. "Gray" suggests Andrea's colorless, passive personality; "golden" represents what he once had. These terms also contrast the imaginary existence and the actual one.[109]

Browning makes use of many of his hundreds of figures in this poem. He refers to two heavenly bodies when he speaks to Lucrezia, begging her to sit for him:

> ...oh, so sweet---
> My face, my moon, my everybody's moon...
>
> And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt...

The "weak-eyed bat" is also important, being a "natural lover of darkness. Andrea prefers the calm security and comforting shades of his four walls to the penetrating light of the world."[110] Lucrezia, also a symbol of darkness, he welcomes, rather than

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[109] Ibid., p. 27.

[110] Ibid., p. 28.

fears, choosing her instead of Rafael and Agnolo. He makes use of touch in such statements as these:

> Your soft hand is a woman of itself...
>
> Love, we are in God's hand.
>
> I could count twenty such
> On twice your fingers, and not leave this town....
> One finger in his beard or twisted curl
> Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,
> One arm about my shoulder, round my neck...
>
> ...my hand kept plying by those hearts,---

One detects irony in the last few lines of the poem, when Andrea makes mention of Leonard, Rafael, and Agnolo in the same breath with himself:

> The three first without a wife,
> While I have mine! So---still they overcome
> Because there's still Lucrezia,---as I choose.
>
> Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

The "as I choose" is ironic for nothing is as he chooses!

Browning reveals another character through the use of irony in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb." Again the title is significant, for the "apparent discrepancy between what he demands and what he gets suggests the unifying irony of the poem"[111] as the Bishop orders his tomb on his dying bed. The reader acquires a view of the character which the character does not hold of himself as Browning ironically sets the scene: the contrast is that "between our palely conventional notions of what expiring bishops ought to be concerning themselves with and the juicy, fullblooded

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[111]King, The Focusing Artifice, p. 78.

actuality...."[112] This Bishop's ruling passion is his tomb: he yearns for marble, lapis lazuli, antique-black, and jasper ("one block, pure green as a pistachio-nut") and for "rosy and flawless" stones---those which represent the rare, the rich. He shuns that which represents the poor, common, or soft, and what is clammy and sweaty like a human body.[113]

When Browning wishes to communicate the state of mind of the Bishop of St. Praxed, who, though dying, is still rooting among material values and desire, he does so by natural description whose precisely observed details have a sensuousness that is over-ripe, gross.[114]

> My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig
> The white-grape where the oil-press stood,
> Drop water gently till the surface sinks,
> And if ye find...Ah, God I know not, I!...
> Bedded in store of rotten figleaves soft,
> And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
> Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli,
> Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
> Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...

The Bishop repeats several colors---all symbolic of that which is rich and rare:

> Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast...
>
> So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
> Did I say basalt for my slab, sons Black---
> 'T was ever antique-black I meant!
>
> Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
> As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.

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[112] Burrows, op. cit., p. 107.

[113] Ibid., p. 111.

[114] Blackburn, op. cit., p. 186.

...True peach,
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!

One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,
There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world---

The progression of colors throughout the monologue serves to point out the Bishop's sensuality and love of art at one and the same time.[115] The Bishop treats these colors lovingly and, even though he realizes that he has not been able to "order" his tomb, he is satisfied with his discourse.

The poem ends with the Bishop speaking in a metaphor as he speaks of Old Gandolf:

That I may watch at leisure if he leers---
Old Gandolf---at me, from his onion-stone...

The Bishop would like to expire, thinking that Old Gandolf would be buried in a tomb not nearly so elaborate as his own!

Figures and money are dominant in Browning's imagistic technique.

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[115]Honan, op. cit., p. 190.

## CHAPTER V

## RHYTHM AND METER

On reading the poetry, dramatic or lyric, of Robert Browning, one presumes that there is possibly some connection between his prosody and his exuberant personality. He was "vigorous...full of a restless and exuberant energy...passionately in love with life...would bound up the steps two at a time, crush a flower in his impatience to discover its soul, or rush to the opposite end of the city to keep a social engagement."[116] His poetry reflects this same ruggedness, this same overflowing energy.

Critics tag Browning a crude poet: "He is indeed one of those writers who treat language not as a musical instrument, needing delicacy no less than power in its handling, but rather as an iron bar which they are to twist and tangle in an exhibition of their prowess..."[117] But Browning used his rhythmical pattern to speak for him, even though there was in him a vein which was "continually tempting him to trample under foot the dignity of verse and to shock the uninitiated reader by colloquial familiarities..."[118] These shocking creations he used to definite advantage, for he was able to bring his metrical pattern

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[116]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 25.

[117]Lucas, op. cit., p. 34.

[118]Joseph B. Mayor, Chapters on English Metre (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 217.

"to the heel of everyday humanity by common speech. By variations of movement and pause, by the contrast of colloquial and 'heightened' language, by his formal but infinitely varied metres, Browning seems to communicate the living movement"[119] of thought and speech. He never allowed his rhythm to be a "mere literary indulgence. The grotesquerie of rhythm and rhyme which some of his poems exhibit, is as organic as any other feature of language-shaping, and shows the rarest command of language."[120]

Oscar Wilde said of Browning that there are moments when he "wounds us by monstrous music. Nay, if we can only get his music by breaking the strings of his lute, he breaks them, and they snap in discord, and no Athenian tettix, making melody from tremulous wings, lights on the ivory horn to make the movement perfect, or the interval less harsh."[121] In truth, the reader finds considerable difficulty in keeping pace with Browning's strange and unclassified metrical arrangements. He was "always trying experiments; sometimes he failed, producing clumsy and irritating metres....Far more often he triumphed, producing a crowd of boldly designed poems, every one of which taken separately might have founded an artistic school."[122] For after all, Browning's vigorously experimental styles are one important indication of the general shift in the nineteenth

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[119]Blackburn, op. cit., p. 167.

[120]Hiram Corson, Introduction to Browning (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., n. d.), p. 92.

[121]Saltus, op. cit., p. 115.

[122]Chesterton, op. cit., p. 158.

century from a closed decorum of style and genre to an open decorum of style and subject[123] already seen in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, Hopkins, Carlyle, etc. Browning need not be so harshly condemned for his innovations in metrical style, as indeed he is "perhaps unequalled. It is hard to think of any other poet whose stylistic range is so great."[124] The critic ought to apply the same criterion in judging metrical achievement as he does to an appreciation of nature and its beauty:

> Some poems ought to be rugged, just as some poems ought to be smooth. When we see a drift of stormy and fantastic clouds at sunset, we do not say that the cloud is beautiful although it is ragged at the edges. When we see a gnarled and sprawling oak, we do not say that it is rugged, nor do we say apologetically that it never meant to be rugged, but became so in its striving after strength. Now, to say Browning's poems, artistically considered, are fine although they are rugged, is quite as absurd as to say that a rock, artistically considered, is fine although it is rugged. Ruggedness being an essential quality in the universe, there is that in man which responds to it as to the striking of any other chord of the eternal harmonies.[125]

Browning may be regarded as a romanticist because of his invention or adaptation of a particular form of verse for each occasion. As he believed that every "circumstance...should be expressed by an appropriate metrical form, he is constantly experimenting with new and unusual metrical combinations. In his work the metrical form suggests by its rhythm the underlying

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[123]Tracy, op. cit., p. 98.

[124]Blackburn, op. cit., p. 176.

[125]Chesterton, op. cit., p. 144.

idea"[126] on many occasions. Browning, in fact, experimented so freely that among all his two hundred or three hundred poems there probably exist half as many different metres as there are different forms.[127] Strangely enough, however, even though Browning is the "iron string in the Victorian lyre,"[128] he really loved music! Under the stimulating influence of his "friend, Eliza Flower, he became an adept in musical science. Strange that one of the harshest of modern poets should also be one of the most accomplished in music!"[129] But the verve of Browning's poetry is precisely the quality which constitutes the perennial originality and attractiveness:

> It is a strain running like an elixir vitae through his verse in its golden era, giving it headiness and flavour. We are reminded of the violent rush of a mountain torrent frothing and seething amongst rocks and fretting its channel, but compensating for its lack of smooth rhythmical flow by the spin and dance, the spray and sparkle of its waters.[130]

The blank verse of Browning which was necessary for his dramatic poems he created into a flexible and fluent instrument, falling "short of the sonorous and sublime simply because his matter fell short."[131] The poet apparently had a notion that blank verse should satisfy the ear's anticipation of five

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[126]Hazard, op. cit., p. xvi.

[127]Chesterton, op. cit., p. 136.

[128]Tracy, op. cit., p. 82.

[129]Palmer, op. cit., p. 127.

[130]Raymond, op. cit., p. 10.

[131]Russell, op. cit., p. 87.

measures; but he felt that ears are unscientific and must accept approximations of the anticipated pattern prearranged by a set metre. Browning used over "eighty combinations which differ in some way from the pattern of iambic pentameter."[132] Likely not since Surrey did a writer produce such a range in variation from this pattern as there exists in Browning.[133] Probably "two-thirds of Browning's enormous quantity of verse is written in unrhymed pentameters;"[134] the peculiarities and variations from this meter in his blank verse "are due largely to the exacting demands of the dramatic monologue for which it was created."[135] Blank verse "conveys unmistakably and sometimes forcibly the rhythms and intonations of a colloquial speaking voice, probably for the first time in English poetry outside the poetic drama."[136] The speaker in the monologues who is speaking from his inner soul must in a special, dramatic situation certainly express himself in a personal and informal tone.

Despite the numerous variations of Browning's blank verse meter, there exist two rules from which he "is never known to depart":

1. A blank verse line must contain not less than nine, nor more than fifteen syllables!

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[132]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 45.

[133]Honan, op. cit., p. 245.

[134]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 33.

[135]Ibid., p. 38.

[136]Burrows, op. cit., p. 81.

2. It must not have less than two heavily stressed syllables nor more than ten![137]

In addition to ten-syllable lines, Browning used nine-, eleven-, twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-, and occasionally fifteen-syllable lines; thirteen-syllable lines are probably almost as common as ten-syllable lines.[138]

In both Browning's blank and rhymed verse the iambus is the predominant foot. The most obvious meter in "Prospice" is doubtless iambic:

x / | x x / | x / | x x / |
The power | of the night, | the press | of the storm, |

x / | x x / |
The post | of the foe; |

These two lines combine the iambic and the anapestic feet, which are closely related, the iambic being duple-and the anapest being triple-meter. The slow, steady beat of iambic feet expresses endurance and courage in meeting death. In the first line of the poem, the first two words make a spondee:

/ / | x / | x / | x x / |
Fear death?-| -to feel | the fog | in my throat, |

This spondaic rhythm indicates the "deliberative realization of the situation. It is the straightening up, as it were, of the whole manhood of the soldier before he begins his battle with death."[139]

This short monologue is excellently written, but the meter here also varies considerably:

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[137]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 41.

[138]Ibid., p. 42.

[139]Curry, op. cit., p. 209.

x x / | x / | x x / | x / |
When the snows | be-gin, | and the blasts | de-note |

x x / | x x / |
I am near | -ing the place |

x x / | x x / | x / | x / | x / |
Bear the brunt, | in a min | -ute pay | glad life's | ar-rears |

x / | / x | x / |
of pain, | darkness | and cold |

/ x | x / | x / | x / | / x | x / |
No! let | me taste | the whole | of it, | fare like | my peers |

x / | x x / |
The he | -roes of old |

In the preceding phrase, two of the syllables break the meter of either iamb or anapest: "No" and"fare." The effect to the ear of these two might be indicated by a reference to the old and complex classical meters; both could be long syllables:[140]

/ | x x / | x / | x / | / | x x / |
No! | let me taste | the whole | of it, | fare | like my peers |

x / | x x / |
The he | -roes of old. |

The expression "of pain, darkness, and cold" furnishes an interesting thought: the iamb shifts to a trochee in the word "darkness." How appropriate that "darkness" becomes a trochee, which usually suggests the "bursting out of feeling against the will, a state of suspense, a fear of loss!"[141]

"Prospice" contains mostly tetrameter and dimeter lines on alternate rhymes. The combination of this duple-triple

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[140]Mayor, op. cit., p. 216.

[141]Curry, op. cit., pp. 203-204.

movement is somewhat suggestive of the classical hexameters:[142]

For the jour-ney is done and the sum-mit at-tained,
And the bar-riers fall,
Though a bat-tle's to fight ere the guer-don be gained
The re-ward of it all...

"Prospice" receives little comment concerning Browning's art, for the poem contains nothing to distract the critical eye or ear, being one of the poet's best expressions of both love and death.

Like "Prospice," "My Last Duchess" attracts less attention for a study of Browning's art because of its structure. One of the most beautifully written poems in the English language, this monologue rhymes in pentameter couplets. But the rhythm and rhyme flow so smoothly that "unfamiliar readers are likely to read the poem with the impression of blank verse."[143] In fact, the poem differs from blank verse in nothing but rhyme; about two-thirds of the lines are enjambed:

Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day...

How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much,..."

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

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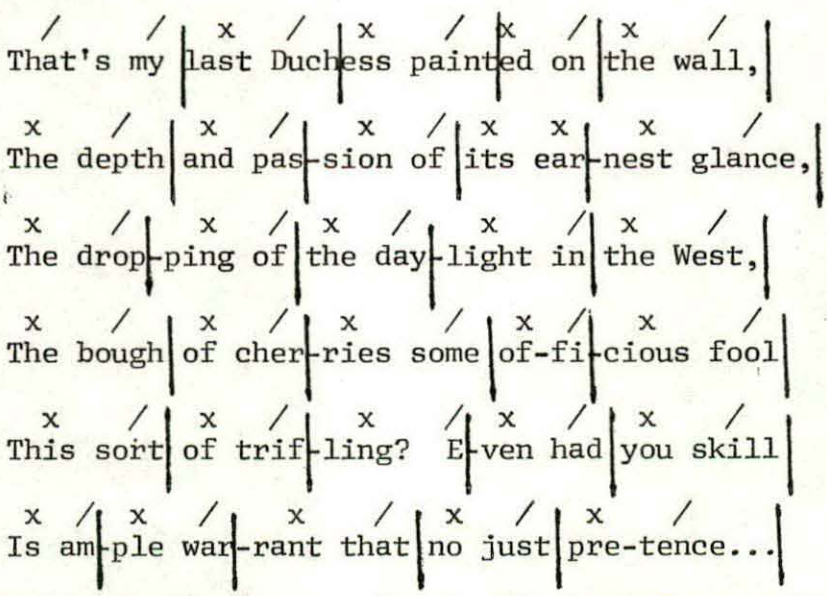
[142] Ibid., p. 267-273.

[143] Hatcher, op. cit., p. 142.

The enjambement makes the resulting rhymes appear more naturally irregular, disregarding the formal regularity of couplet rhymes. This skillful, deliberate informalizing of a formal pattern, besides suggesting the actual rhythms of natural conversational speech, seems to echo as well the tone of the "Duke's confidence. He, too, is relaxing his usual proud formality on this occasion, and we are aware both that this departure from formality has some significance and that the formality is still there, though muted, in the background."[144]

The tendency of the rhythm in "My Last Duchess" is toward the iambic foot:




The iambic foot expresses "controlled passion,---passion expressed with deliberation. It implies resolution, confidence, or the heroic carrying out of an intention...cumulation of emotion under the domination of will with a definite purpose or conscious realization of a situation."[145] Doubtless the iambus here shows the

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[144]Burrows, op. cit., p. 116.

[145]Curry, op. cit., p. 204.

"domineering and tyrannical spirit of the character. The almost prosaic irregularity of the feet is certainly very expressive of his thinking and feeling. It is easy, in this passage, to realize the appropriate expressiveness of Browning's metre."[146]

In the preceding selected lines, the feet "last Duch-" and "no just" should probably be spondaic; the feet "-sion of" and "-ping of" could be pyrrhic. But these lines still have basically the same kind of rhythm.

There appear, however, a few lines which have a slightly rugged meter:

/ | x x / | x x / | x | / / |
Broke | in the or-|chard for her, | the | white mule... |

The metrical ear might discover here two anapests and a spondee, with two syllables---one stressed and the other unstressed---appearing brokenly.

Or one might read the line thus:

/ x x | / x | x / | x / / |
Broke in the | or-chard | for her | the white mule...

Or:

/ | x x / | x x / | x / / |
Broke | in the or-|chard for her | the white mule... |

Both of these last readings require the use of classical meters with "the white mule" being a bacchius, and "Broke" in the last reading a long syllable.[147] The other feet, of course, are the Browning mixture of traditional dactyl, trochee, iamb and anapest. But lines like this are very rare in this poem. Browning's

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[146] Ibid., p. 214.

[147] Mayor, op. cit., p. 216.

experimental meters appear elsewhere than in this, masterfully handled.

In "A Grammarian's Funeral" Browning uses as in "Prospice" the long line, followed by a short one. The shift in the kind of line "introduces a new movement which is likely to disturb the even flow of the expected metre."[148] This unusual metrical form consists of an iambic pentameter line followed by a shorter two-foot line of a dactyl and a trochee or a spondee.

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
Let us | be-gin | and car- | ry up | this corpse, |

/ x x | / x |
Singing to- | geth-er. |

/ x | x / | x / | x / | x / |
Leave we | the com- | mon crofts, | the vul- | gar thorpes, |

/ x x | / x |
Each in its | teth-er |

/ x | / / | x / | x / | x / |
Sleep-ing | safe on | the bos- | om of | the plain, |

/ x x | / / |
Cared-for till | cock-crow; |

Browning handles this poem with his usual metrical freedom: many of the lines begin with a reversed foot, (the "leave we" of the second example reads best as a trochee in a line of iambs) and frequent and various substitutions appear in the lines.

/ x | x / | x / | x / | x / |
No! Yon- | der spar- | kle is | the cit- | a-del's |

/ x x | / x |
Circ-ling its | sum-mit. |

/ x | x / | / / | x / | x / |
Thith-er | our path | lies; wind | we up | the heights: |

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[148] Hatcher, op. cit., p. 139.

/ x x | / x |
Wait ye the | warn-ing? |

x / | / / | x / | x x | x / |
Our low | life was | the lev-el's and | the night's; |

/ x x | / x |
He's for the | morn-ing. |

/ x | x / | / / | x / | x / |
Step to | a tune, | square chests, | e-rect | each head, |

/ x x | / x |
'Ware the be-hold-ers! |

By this particular metrical form, Browning "doubtless appropriately suggests the combination of marching and singing[149] as the devoted disciples carry the grammarian's corpse up the mountain side.

The meter of "A Grammarian's Funeral," is considered usually to be beautiful and strange, but difficult. The two kinds of lines by themselves are not complex, but by using the two together, Browning creates a difficult combination. Many ears do not easily switch from one meter to the other in the same flow of movement.[150]

Even though Browning exercises great freedom in the metrical form of his rhymed verse, the blank verse shows even greater variation. "With few exceptions the metre is rough and often rebellious in the restraint of the pattern. In many instances this seems to be by design..."[151] There exists, in the midst of the ruggedness, a peculiar principle. In blank verse "there is greater variation of the feet than in almost any other form of poetry, and yet in this the length of line is most fixed...where the foot is

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[149]Burrows, op. cit., p. 81.

[150]Hatcher, op. cit., p. 28.

[151]Ibid., p. 40.

more regular, there are great variations in the length of line."[152] There seems then to be a law that fixed line occurs with variable feet and variable line with regular metric feet. Browning follows this principle somewhat because his blank verse monologues contain a rather regular length of line, but quite irregular metric feet.

In "Andrea del Sarto" the majority of the lines may be read as fairly strictly as iambic pentameter:

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
But do | not let | us quar- | rel an- | y-more,

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
You turn | your face, | but does | it bring | your heart?

x / | x / | / / | x / | x /
And look | a half- | hour forth | on Fie- | so-le,

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
So free | we seem, | so fet- | tered fast | we are!

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
The fowl- | er's pipe, | and fol- | lows to | the snare---

x / | x / | / / | x / | x /
If you | would sit | thus by | me ever- | y night

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
Again | the Cous- | in's whis- | tle! Go, | my Love.

The regularity with which Andrea speaks creates a mutedness in his exclamations, and together the regularity and mutedness of the rhythm have the effect of toning down most of the feelings evoked as he speaks; his lack of feeling, his placidity, is felt throughout the poem.[153] The rhythmic pattern becomes a profound part of the meaning of the poem. The basically conventional line with a predetermined number of syllables and stresses "breaks with

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[152] Curry, op. cit., p. 199.

[153] Honan, op. cit., p. 248.

the musical tradition in the placement of syllables within the line, proposing to relate closely what is felt and said with the manner of saying it,"[154] using rhythm to create and support meaning. The regular rhythm emphasizes Andrea's passivity; the brokenness reflects his psychological chaos.

In "Andrea del Sarto," as in all the monologues, Browning apparently chose the rhythm which served as the best medium to portray that particular character. The smoothness of the following line indicates passivity and resignation:

x / | x / | x / | x / | x /
How I | could paint | were I | but back | in France |

He never allowed set rules of rhythm to hinder his creation:

/ x x | / x x | x / | x / |
Qui-et-ly, | qui-et-ly | the even | ing through... |

in which two trochees begin the line; the last two measures are iambs. Browning often used trisyllabic measures in the monologues. Or a line like this one:

/ x | / / | x / | x / | x /
Holds the | trees saf- | er, hud- | dled more | inside... |

Of the five feet, two are substitutes. One is a spondee; the other, a trochee, begins the line with a stressed syllable, which is also typically Browningian. A line like this one strains the meter a little more relentlessly:

/ | x / | x / | x x / | x / |
Heart, | or whate'er else, | than goes on | to prompt... |

Or this:

x / | x / | x / | / | x x / |
The sud- | den blood | of these | men! | at a word--- |

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[154] King, The Bow and the Lyre, p. 19.

Occasionally there appears a line with several successive accented syllables:

/ / | / / | x / | x / | x / |
Poor this | long while, | de-spised, | to speak | the truth. |

A different kind of rhythm marks this line:

x x | / / | x / | x x | / / |
All his | court round | him, see | -ing with | his eyes... |

Although the basic meter of "Andrea del Sarto" is iambic pentameter, variations and substitutions do occur wherever Browning felt the need.

The rhythm of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" is loosely iambic pentameter; that is, many of the lines appear as such:

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
Draw round | my bed: | is An | -selm keep | -ing back?... |

x / | / / | x / | x / | x / |
Yet still | my niche | is not | so cramped | but thence... |

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
And up | in-to | the ai | -ry dome | where live... |

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
And have | I not | Saint Prax | ed's ear | to pray... |

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
As still | he en | vied me, | so fair | she was! |

The lines contain much enjambement, as seen in the second, third, and fourth examples; this practice is, of course, quite common in blank verse. Extra accented syllables are not common in this poem, but when they do appear they give added emphasis by their presence:

x / | / / | x / | x / | x / |
And see | God made | and eat | -en all | day long, |

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
And feel | the stea | dy can | -dle-flame, | and taste |

/ / | / / | x / | x / | x / |
Good strong | thick stu- | pe-fy- | ing in- | cense-smoke! |

The third line has only two extra stresses and only two less unaccented syllables, but the "arrangement of four consecutive stresses after half a dozen fairly regular iambic lines gives it rhythmic emphasis, so that its cadence and phonetic quality reinforce its effect."[155] Departure from the normal cadence heightens the effect of the message and gives a key to the character of the Bishop to whom the incense-smoke is more vital than his own argument.

The movement of the lines sometimes expresses more adequately the Bishop's physical actions:

x / | x / | x x | x / | x / |
I fold | my arms | as if | they clasped | a crook, |

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
And stretch | my feet | forth straight | as stone | can point, |

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / |
And let | the bed- | clothes, for | a mort- | cloth, drop |

x x | / / | x / | x / | x / |
Into | great laps | and folds | of sculp- | tor's work... |

The feet in the first line stretch forth in a long line that pushes slowly forward in ten monosyllabic words of which seven are slightly stressed. The rhythms of the third line "drop over and down like the bedclothes into words which obstruct the flow and impose a careful finality of articulation: 'great laps and folds.'"[156] Browning used many monosyllabic words here, as in the other monologues. Possibly this is partially a result of

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[155]Honan, op. cit., p. 251.

[156]Burrows, op. cit., p. 112.

his insistence on the use of colloquial and everyday usage! This use of monosyllables may also contribute to the portrayal of the man as physically weak, as in this line:

Not yours this time! I want you at my side

To hear them---

Many of these lines defy the set pattern of the iambic pentameter. The first line of the poem is one of the best examples:

/ x x | / x | / x | / x x |
Van-i-ty, | saith the | preach-er, | van-i-ty! |

The line consists of the ten syllables necessary for a perfect pentameter, but the meter is hardly that. A dactyl at the beginning and end of the line could indicate a bursting out of feeling against the will!

Although Browning in some of the blank verse monologues resorts occasionally to as many as fifteen-syllable lines, he rather consistently clings to the ten-syllable line in both "Andrea del Sarto" and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb." The basic meter is the iambic pentameter, which Otto Jesperson has said may "without any exaggeration be termed the most important metre of all in the literatures of the North-European world."[157] But where Browning is somewhat consistent in the syllabic length of line, he exercises freedom in the particular meter of that line. He never allows meter to interfere with the thinking or processes of his characters, proving that metre is a difficult subject in

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[157]Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin, Essays on the Language of Literature (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 71.

which to lay down general principles, lest they become artificial rules. Every poem that is really great shows something new in the way of combining imperfect feet and the student of poetry must study the movement for himself.

## CONCLUSION

After approximately three-quarters of a century, critics "are beginning to consider the poetry of Browning as poetry---he is beginning to emerge as a poet, rather than as a preacher of false doctrine."[158] Scathingly, wittily, and at the same time, "carefully and without animosity," critics are analyzing him and showing themselves to be friends of the poet as a poet.[159] George Saintsbury said of his ability:

> He could, it was clear, not merely manipulate words and verse in a manner almost suggesting prestidigitation, but was also much more than a mere word-and-metre-monger. On certain sides of the great problem of life he could think with boldness and originality, if not with depth: the depth of Mr. Browning's thought belongs to the same mistaken tradition as his obscurity, and reminds me of those inky pools in the limestone districts which look and are popularly reputed to be about nineteen foot two. He had above all a command of the most universally appealing, if not also the loftiest, style of poetry,---that which deals with love,---hardly equalled except by the very greatest, and not often excelled even by them.[160]

Another critic has called him the "king of poets whose eagle vision swept the whole vast and complex panorama of human life, and found there abundant reason for joy, despite the suffering and sin he saw only too clearly."[161]

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[158]Williams, op. cit., p. 156.

[159]Boyd Litzinger, Times Revenges: Browning's Reputation as a Thinker, 1889-1962 (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1964), p. 20.

[160]Litzinger and Knickerbocker, op. cit., p. 32.

[161]Dallas Kenmare, Ever a Fighter (London: James Barrie, 1952), p. 11.

All poets do not create with the same artistic touch; for art is intuition, and intuition is individuality, and "individuality does not repeat itself. To conceive of the history of the artistic production of the human race as developed along a single line of progress and regress would therefore be altogether erroneous."[162] Browning's originality expresses itself in the variety of his experiments, especially in his technique.

Concerning form, "it was characteristic of the poet's erratic conventionality that in all of these matters he should give himself all the rope the law allowed but never really strain at the tether."[163] The general belief that Browning did not care for form is false, for he was always weaving, modelling, and inventing new forms:

> ...if we study Browning honestly, nothing will strike us more than that he really created a large number of quite novel and quite admirable artistic forms. It is too often forgotten what and how excellent these were...The invention of these things is not merely like the writing of a good poem---it is something like the invention of the sonnet or the Gothic arch. The poet who makes them does not merely create himself---he creates other poets.[164]

For Browning may be at times pedantic, grotesque, and garrulous; he may disregard ready-made rules and override regulations. But he did not neglect form. "Indeed this very self-consciousness that made him constantly aware of what he

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[162]Croce, Benedetto, (Translated from the Italian by Douglas Ainslie), Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic (Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1965), p. 136.

[163]Russell, op. cit., p. 87.

[164]Chesterton, op. cit., p. 137.

was doing operated to prevent the complete abandonment of emotion or vision that marks the lyrist and the seer."[165]

Browning wrote with the principle foremost in his mind that sense should not be sacrificed to sound. "Thought before expression, matter before form, are marked characteristics of his work."[166] He wanted to clothe his subject matter in appropriate garments; most of the time he was successful. Browning's poetry reveals his nature to the careful reader.

Though Browning's poems are not all of the same value, certainly the monologues will be of lasting interest. The technique involved in their creation was hard won. Browning had learned so much from his trials at the drama, and these efforts enabled him to fuse his knowledge in better dramatic monologues.

The world has known great poets; the world has known great dramatists; the world has known great novelists, literary critics, etc. But had not Robert Browning lived, the world would have been deprived of the great monologues of its literature. No writer has ever contributed so much in this literary form as has Browning. His remarkable technique makes him a master of dramatic presentation.

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[165]Russell, op. cit., p. 87.

[166]Hazard, op. cit., p. xvii.

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